

Frostbiting

Frostbiting, according to local buffs, originated in Manhasset, Long Island, on a New Year's Day in the 1930's -- probably after repeal of the Volstead Act.

According to a piece by Bruce Doten in last Sunday's Boston Globe, frostbiting is basically a winter way to keep your sailing hand in shape, practice your tactics and improve your skills.

On Bluefish River in Duxbury on Sept. 24, 11 skippers gathered, "clinging, by racing rules, to an historic elm, nursing champagne, waiting for their new season.

"Out to the aptly-named 'Bug' and back, the ninth annual Bug Light Race covered about eight miles as the crew skims over water.

"Hoisting sails and champagne glasses, participants covered more than crew-mileage and found adventures not ubiquitously associated with yacht racing."

Then, after a cocktail party at the home of Commodore Theodor Jones on Washington St., the frostbiters were ready for a winter of racing, with club races every Sunday with flood tide in Duxbury Bay. There are several short races in one afternoon. "We race until we are popped," says W.D. Keleher, race committee chairman. "You get practice in six or seven starts and races that would equal the experience gained in several weeks of summer competition."

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The sailors don't race in guaranteed capsizing weather, according to Terry Keleher.

"We try to be more prudent and careful -- than chicken. It is slightly more than stimulating to fall into Massachusetts Bay at 33 degree water temperature."

Dr. Lansing Bennett, one of the veterans of frostbiting, is quoted by Doten: "We used to race against Harvard and MIT and generally it was a stand-off. The collegians weren't as 'gung-ho' as us Duxbury salts."

Members of the Duxbury Frostbite Society, who have been sailing since 1958 from September through April, gather for liquid cheer at the Winsor House, where they thaw out before a roaring fireplace. As Doten notes, their "yachts are almost exclusively the tiny, fiberglass quasi-bathtubs known as Inter Clubs, easy to get into via the pocketbook and fun to get out of after a spray-soaking race in the chilling aftermath of an uninvited Massachusetts nor'easter.

Duxbury frostbiters are trying to spread the team racing concept in New England, according to Keleher, who is vice commodore.